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OBSERVATIONS

ON THE

ORIGIN AND CONDUCT

OF THE

WAR WITH MEXICO.

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THE ORIGIN AND CONDUCT OF

THE

WAR WITH MEXICO.

It has been the fortune of this country, perhaps its misfortune, to have become involved in hostilities with a neighboring republic. Such a state of things was contemplated many years ago however, as possible, by our leading statesmen, to whom no intentions of precipitate action, nor any ambitious designs, were ever attributed. Indeed, we may safely aver, that if hostilities had been commenced against Mexico long before the annexation of Texas, the people of this country would have been ready to sustain such a measure, and have given it their hearty approval.

The subsequent causes which have arisen for the attitude we have assumed, resulting from the addition of Texas to the Union, would in all probability have never been questioned, if an internal discord of opinion had not prevailed among ourselves, on the subject of slavery. This has led to opposition in certain quarters, to the measures of the Government, and has drawn public attention too much from the consideration of the war as a national measure of public justice, as well as from its origin, conduct, and real character.

These are questions which belong to history, which other nations will regard with interest, and in that view they should be treated. The theory of our domestic institutions, the provisions of our constitution, and the conflicting opinions of politicians on slavery, have nothing, or should have nothing to do with the broad question of our relations with Mexico. This is an independent topic, and should be treated as such. We are not willing that the judgment of the age should be warped by irrelative issues. To contribute our humble share, therefore, to a right exposition of the case, we shall proceed briefly to examine the origin and conduct of the war.

We may start with the proposition, then, that our relations with Mexico for twenty years past have been of an offensive and threatening character. The attention of Congress has again and again been attracted to their condition, not only by the communications of successive Presidents, but by the earnest petitions of our citizens, asking for redress and indemnity for unprovoked and eminently unjust aggressions on our commerce. No nation on earth would have so long refrained from exacting justice from Mexico by force of arms as we have done. We have borne our wrongs from her with patience, until patience has ceased to be a virtue. In our negotiations

with France for redress of similar wrongs, the language of President Jackson, bold and even denunciatory, was applauded by the people. And during our difficulties with England in relation to the North-western boundary and the territory of Oregon, not a lisp of censure was heard from those lips now pouring forth their imprecations on the war with Mexico. We heard only of aspirations for the continuance of honorable peace. But now an element of mischief is at work. Wrongs committed by Mexico, in the opinion of some writers, are no wrongs, because slavery has not been exterminated in Texas. Improper and ill-timed issues have been made, and "all seems yellow to the jaundiced eye."

After years of negotiation, our Government succeeded in arranging a Convention for the adjustment and settlement of our claims, pursuant to a treaty made and ratified by both countries. Any nation pretending to respectability of character, would have sought to carry out the provisions of such a treaty. But what was the result in the case of Mexico? A gross violation of the stipulated conditions of the payment of our claims occurred before one third of the debt had been liquidated; and during the sessions of the convention itself, the most frivolous, unjust, and deceptive means were resorted to, to prevent a full acknowledgment and recognition of those claims.

Even Mr. Webster has admitted, what every honest American must admit, that the United States had well founded claims against Mexico, and that Mexico has behaved most wrongfully towards us. Indeed, to assert the contrary, would be to falsify the history of our country, and discredit its official documents. The abrupt termination of this convention, after a studied delay on the part of the Mexican Commissioners, left a large majority of our American claims unsettled; those which were allowed were never fully satisfied, and those which should have been so, were thrown aside, and the applicants for indemnity were left to bear up against the loss of their property and the ruin of their hopes as best they could. The idea that the commerce of this country can be preyed upon for years, and that our merchants and shippers may be ruined by every association of plunderers who can get our property into their power, is an absurdity too gross to need exposure. This Union was formed for high and useful purposes, and not the least of these, was the protection of the life, liberty and property of American citizens.

The annexation of Texas is considered as one of the causes of the war, and so it has been treated both in the newspapers and on the floor of Congress. That it has to do with the war we will not deny; but if it has been made a cause of difficulty, Mexico alone is responsible for the consequences. This distinction should be kept up in the minds of all reflecting persons. The annexation of Texas was not an act of War on our part. That was a Republic which had taken its place among the nations of the earth. Its freedom was recognised officially by the most powerful of the European Governments, and diplomatic intercourse, according to the laws of nations, had grown up between Texas and its new found friends. The recognition of its independence being thus general, and fully established, left it the power to seek the alliance of France or England, or more wisely, to become a member of a confederacy, where the *Ægis* of liberty could be held up for its protection, and where it could affiliate with kindred interests, hopes and destinies.

Even Mexico had admitted this independent position of Texas, by a proposition and an effort to negotiate. There was no doubt then, and there can be no doubt, that the annexation of Texas was no just cause of offence to Mexico. Indeed, after all the angry correspondence between the Mexican

Secretary of State and our former minister at the capital, a new negotiation was agreed upon, and might have terminated honorably and peacefully to both parties, but for the fresh misconduct of the Mexican Government.

Our minister, sent out in good faith and under a pledge that he should be received and accredited—our squadron withdrawn from the Mexican coasts, and our earnest proffers of amity, were only made the bases of new insults, and the commission of an act of inhospitality and bad faith towards that minister, whose life indeed was scarcely safe in the hands of a perfidious people. The treatment of Mr. Slidell was of itself cause of war, as well for its injurious effects upon the national honor and character, as because it was an act jeopardizing those high and lofty principles, which, by recognising a solemn embassy, permit Governments to arrange their difficulties through their diplomatic agents, and give assurance that the good faith of nations is yet a guarantee for the preservation of their commercial and political relations.

Texas becoming an integral portion of the United States, was immediately entitled to the protection afforded to the other members of the confederacy. The boundary of the new state, as claimed by it, was recognised by the nations of the earth when they recognised its independence. Mr. Clay, however much he may have opposed the measures of the present administration, has distinctly asserted, that by the treaty of Louisiana, the boundary, as claimed by Texas, was fully established. In 1836, the Congress of Texas declared the Rio del Norte to be the boundary of the Republic; it had "exercised and extended its jurisdiction" beyond the Nueces; that portion of territory south of the Rio had been represented in the Congress of Texas; and finally, in 1845, our own Congress had included it within the circle of our revenue system, placing officers to reside there for the very purpose of supervising and sustaining it. Thus this country in each particular committed itself on this boundary question; and as the representatives of all parties in Congress assented to it, it became indisputably a settled question, "odorous with nationality."

Other measures became unavoidable, from the very nature of things, and Texas was as much entitled to our sympathy and protection, as any portion of the confederacy. That protection was needed, is a matter of history. A Mexican force threatened a fresh attack, and Texas, worn out with its long and bloody struggle for freedom, required, as it had a right to do, our prompt assistance. Thus we perceive there was an imperious necessity for action on our part; the collection of the revenue, important enough even in times of peace, to make the employment of a fleet of armed cutters indispensable, and the defence of our territory, demanded the presence of an American force in the quarter threatened. The manner in which this was done, was marked with as much judgment as delicacy.

The President, through his Secretary of War, placed a small force under the command of Col. Taylor, Brevet Brigadier General, an experienced and brave officer, and by no means a senior of his grade. The propriety of this first movement is highly worthy of commendation. There was no display of any of the pomp and circumstance of war—no great military effort—no thrusting forward of superior general officers, as if some grand design was intended; it was the mere disposition of a command, in the manner constantly practised by our Government, to protect a distant post, and as has for years been usual upon the rivers and prairies of the far west. Still further to determine the character of this movement, we have only to look at the instructions given by the Secretary of War to General Taylor, which were, to abstain from all aggressive conduct towards Mexico and the Mexicans, and to commit no act of hostility unless in self-defence.

In the selection of General Taylor, the War Department displayed great

sagacity and good sense; and in relieving him from the control of his superior officers in the southern military department, it left him free to act according to the dictates of his own excellent judgment. His former services had established his reputation, and his conduct confirmed the good opinion entertained of him at Washington. And it is evident, upon the perusal of the recently published correspondence, that his opinions were frankly sought, and generally as frankly adopted.

It is also evident that the whole procedure of Gen. Taylor was in contemplation of a pacific mission. In a letter to Gen. Worth, he declared he apprehended no collision; and that General Worth entertained the same opinion, is evident from his returning to the United States and desiring to throw up his commission. Those who would charge the Government with a desire to commence war, must, therefore shut their eyes to the instructions of the President to Gen. Taylor, as well as to the recorded opinions of that discreet officer, that there would be no collision, opinions of which he made no secret whatever. The Mexicans took the initiative, with their usual craftiness and love of blood. The massacre of Col. Cross and of Lieutenant Porter, and the unprovoked attack upon the command of Captains Thornton and Hardie, were demonstrations of hostility, worthy only of barbarians and murderers, and these were upon territory not only known as a portion of Texas, but admitted to be such in an official proclamation by Gen. Woll, one of the officers of Mexico herself! The American Government was at all times willing to treat with Mexico. It was Mexico, unwilling to receive the olive branch, that must fairly be charged with a premeditated design to make war.

And here we may pause for a moment to contemplate the character of the instructions given to the American commander by the Secretary of War. In the letter of July 9, 1846, a spirit of forbearance and magnanimity breathes in every line, humanity influences every dictate, and the pacific intentions of the Government are everywhere apparent. In the appeal made to the Mexicans themselves, through an official proclamation prepared at Washington, the people of Mexico are alluded to with kindness far greater than they deserved; and only against their betrayers and oppressors, the real causes of their misery, were its denunciations uttered.

War then existed by the acts of Mexico herself; and our own Congress, unable to shut its eyes to the fact, officially recognized its existence. The battles of Palo Alto and Resaca de la Palma, the siege of Fort Brown, the capture of Matamoras, and the advance upon and storming of Monterey, followed in brilliant succession. They are events too well known to need our eulogy; they are such, to use the language of the Secretary of War, as entitle them to be considered everywhere "examples of courage and of skill, scarcely excelled in the history of military operations." They have been followed up by a disposition of our forces, which cannot fail to close the war with immortal honor to the American arms.

he plans upon which the war has been conducted, have been the subject of much discussion. And by many a caviller

"That never set a squadron in the field,
Nor the division of a battle knows
More than a spinster."

Studiously keeping out of view the chief and controlling principles which have all along governed the action of the President and the War Department, such persons have been as unfair in their criticisms, as they have been unsound in their opinions. At one time the administration was charged with sending a small army to be cut off, thus abandoning the idea of its being adequate to a war of conquest, and at others, with the intention of destroy-

ing the whole Mexican population. At one time the supposed plans of the campaign have been denounced as absurd and ridiculous; and now again, as success has nobly vindicated the ability in which they were conceived, they are claimed as the suggestions of General Scott. In short, it is utterly impossible to imagine any operations which would have met with approval in the quarters to which we have alluded.

Now we venture to assert, that no military enterprises undertaken by this country, have ever before been so successful; and history will not only stamp the actions of the war as brilliant in the highest degree, but also pronounce its conduct by the appropriate Departments sagacious and masterly.

The Secretary of War was first called on to post a small force on the boundary line of Mexico. He did so, and the army and the commander proved fully adequate to the purpose. With unexampled celerity the scattered forces of the nation were gathered together, consolidated and placed in position, and the commanding officer had full power to increase his strength.

The military power of the National Government was thus early placed at his disposal, and he was armed with all the additional resources which the laws would permit, to meet any possible exigency. If that force had proved in any way at first inadequate, the responsibility must clearly have fallen on the commanding officer. The Secretary of War had exhausted his means under the existing law, providing for the extension and equipment of the regular force to be employed in Texas. The President had not the right to call for volunteers, without a special act of Congress, or under the Constitutional emergency of an invasion of the territory of the Union. The existence of this emergency as a fact on which to base a call, could not be known at Washington in time to be made available. That was an occasion, which the conduct of the Mexican troops only could create. So far indeed was General Taylor from complaining of a want of troops, that he actually wrote to the Secretary of War, his chief embarrassment was in having too many! But suppose, on the contrary, he found his force too small; the only legitimate means of remedying its inferiority, was by a call upon the authorities of the states for aid, and to do this he had early and timely instructions from the War Department. Let those who would assail its efficient head refer to the documental evidence at hand, and blush for their unfairness. On the 23d of August, 1845, the Secretary of War wrote to General Taylor as follows:

“The information hitherto received as to the intentions of Mexico, and the measures she may adopt, does not enable the administration here to give you more explicit instructions in regard to your movements, than those which have been already forwarded to you. There is reason to believe that Mexico is making efforts to assemble a large army on the frontier of Texas, for the purpose of entering its territory and holding forcible possession of it. Of their movements you are doubtless advised, and we trust have taken, or early will take, prompt and efficient steps to meet and repel any such hostile incursion. Should Mexico assemble a large body of troops on the Rio Grande, and cross it with a considerable force, such a movement must be regarded as an invasion of the United States, and the commencement of hostilities. You will, of course, use all the authority which has been or may be given you to meet such a state of things. Texas must be protected from hostile invasion, and for that purpose you will, of course, employ to the utmost extent all the means you possess or can command. An order has this day been issued, for sending one thousand more men into Texas to join those under your command. When the existing orders are carried into effect, you will have with you a force of 4,000 men of the regular army. We are not enabled to judge what auxiliary force can, upon an emergency, be brought together from Texas; and as a precautionary measure, you are authorized to accept volunteers from the states

of Louisiana and Alabama, and even from Mississippi, Tennessee and Kentucky. Should Mexico declare war, or commence hostilities by crossing the Rio Grande with a considerable force, you are instructed to lose no time in giving information to the authorities of each or all of the above states."

And General Taylor, in the contemplated emergency, did avail himself of this authority.

Thus, it seems that every preparation was made EIGHT MONTHS in advance of the possible emergency of General Taylor's position, by the Secretary of War; full power was given him to act, and the authorities of the states alluded to were informed of his power to make the necessary requisitions.

General Taylor, at his own discretion, took the course he did. He had confidence in himself—in his officers and troops; and whether his movement under his instructions, to bring up supplies from Point Isabel, was such a one as he should have been compelled to make, after planting his standard at Matamoras, is a matter which is now of no consequence. The Mexicans attempted to destroy his army and were defeated themselves. To have gained such battles, would be a sufficient excuse for any mistake or misapprehension of the views of the enemy.

In tracing out the immediate consequences of these actions, it has been urged that General Taylor should have pursued the Mexicans across the Rio Grande. But after the fatigue of two hard-fought actions, it is very doubtful, to say the least, whether it would have been prudent to follow the fugitive foe into that swift current where so many lost their lives. Had the plans of the Secretary of War been fully carried out by Congress, there is scarcely a doubt that the defeated army might have been captured. In his report of the 5th of December, 1846, it is distinctly stated, that the Department had, for years previously, asked for an appropriation to construct ponton bridges, but, as is too often the case with our representatives, they paid no attention to the suggestion. Had it been adopted in time, no doubt the immediate consequences of General Taylor's victory would have been equally as brilliant as the conflicts themselves.

The river was at length crossed, and the American flag was hoisted at Matamoras. The American drum-beat was then heard, for the first time, upon the Mexican territory.

Thus far, we believe, we have made out, to the satisfaction of every intelligent and candid mind, whatever may be its political bias, a complete vindication of the course of the Government previously and up to the occupation of the west bank of the Rio Grande. In no other light can this course be viewed, if we regard the truth of history or the obligations of candor.

Here a new question arises—were OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS just or expedient after that event? No one can deny the right of a state to make war, and it is the only resource among nations where remonstrance fails; and it is an admitted principle which no one can deny, that during war, the public force—the navies and armies of a nation—may lawfully be employed to destroy the navies and armies of its enemy. And some eminent writers, on what are termed the rights of war, have advocated the infliction of extreme severities upon those who have, by a protracted resistance, caused the unnecessary effusion of blood. This principle, though acted upon by the armies of European powers, has not been adopted by us. So far from this, there is not an instance of our forces having availed themselves of the plunder of the places they have captured, as at Monterey, nor have our commanders exercised the power of exacting contributions, which is admitted by eminent jurists to be within the just rights of a conquering force.

We have not, since the commencement of our operations upon the west side of the Rio Grande, availed ourselves of the extreme rights of our position; and while the most savage and assassin-like murders have been committed by the Mexicans upon those unfortunate Americans who have fallen accidentally into their hands, our troops have humanely forgotten the animosities which war creates, and have treated their undeserving captives as friends and brothers.

Though Napoleon asserted that war must support war, our policy has been different. Our army has paid liberally for its supplies; it has afforded protection to the territory captured; and its effective action, though preceded by the smoke of battle, has been in restoring safety and tranquillity wherever it has planted its eagles.

We repeat, then, that we have had clearly the right of all other nations to attack and weaken our enemy; and to do this effectually, our armies were of necessity compelled to advance.

Besides the right, we have seen the necessity of offensive operations. Even when we were victorious, pacific overtures again made to Mexico have been allowed to sleep on the table of her Congress, and, as far as events may indicate, the policy of that government is not now marked by a desire for peace any more than at any former period; and the truth is, peace is not the element by which Mexican statesmen gain or maintain their personal ascendancy. The Prætorians of the Roman Empire were not more influential or corrupt in their day, than the armies which in Mexico follow either against a foreign enemy, or even their own countrymen, the bloody aspirants to power, who can afford the greatest amount of money, or are most lavish in promises of future bounty.

With an offensive war thus justified in every possible view, a line of operations was marked out, which, though when misunderstood was made in some quarters the subject of cavil, is now admitted to discover the highest military tact and genius.

The conduct of the President in this emergency was manly and patriotic, and deserves the thanks of every man who has a regard for the honor of the country. It became evident to him that local operations upon the Rio Grande, or along the Gulf Coast, however brilliant and necessary, were not all that were to be considered. A glance at the map of North America admonished him that Mexico rested on the Pacific, and that she had there a military organization and some vessels of war. He perceived, too, the danger to which our large commercial interests in that ocean might be subjected, and he also regarded those important interests connected with the movements of our western trading caravans, and the programme of the campaign was constructed accordingly. While these interests were to be secured and protected on the one hand, Mexico was to be assailed on the other. The arrangement of our forces was made to this end, and the most complete success attended the enterprise.

The expedition of Gen. Kearney to Santa Fé, at the head of a gallant though not numerous army,—his line of march being westward from Missouri, resulted in the conquest of New Mexico, and the subsequent occupation of Upper California. Security was thus given to our trade in the Pacific, and ports were provided for the accommodation of our whaling and merchant vessels. The march of Gen. Kearney was attended with success, unstained by any acts of inhumanity towards the inhabitants of those provinces. So far from that, a temporary code of law has been promulgated under the authority of the government, which for the first time illustrates to a down-trodden race the blessings of civil and religious liberty.

The expedition of Gen. Wool, equally well planned, has been equally successful.

While the occupation of Santa Fé gave our forces the command of the passes to the Pacific, Gen. Wool's operations, directed for many hundred miles westward from San Antonio de Bexar, gave us the present control of another large portion of the Mexican territory, cut it off from the capital, prevented its taking a part in the campaign at the South, and enabled him to sweep down in triumph to Saltillo, to unite with General Taylor and threaten a march on San Luis de Potosi. Meanwhile, Mexico, perfidious to the last, is to be assailed at a point where her best and greatest strength remains; and thus taken at last in her own net, conquered on her own territory, she will be compelled to listen to the offers of peace so often made in friendship, and henceforward to be presented in mercy.

It is evident from this glance at the plan of the campaign, that an immense territory has been captured from Mexico; and that all our military movements have been in harmony, and thus far completely successful.

It is the opinion, indeed, of eminent engineers, that so large a field of operations was never before so completely attempted by a small army; never with such means was so much acquired, never were more splendid victories gained at such odds.

Co-operating with the army, our navy has been a vigilant and powerful ally. The conduct of our commanders in the Pacific and in the Gulf has been the subject of public congratulation. It is the fortune of all naval forces, when engaged in combined operations, to be subordinate in their movements to those of the army, and their reputation sometimes suffers under the accidents, which belong to a lee shore, an exposed roadstead, or the difficulty of contrary winds. On the ocean, a ship is a thing of life; in a harbor it is but a battery. Our navy, however, under all these disadvantages, has added to its established fame, and will be found ready to strike a decisive blow when the proper time arrives.

In looking at the results of the war in Mexico, we cannot but notice the remarkable fact, that our army and navy have covered a line of coast and territory of 2,500 miles in length, without material loss, in two campaigns, while those of France, after eighteen years of active operations, at an immense expenditure of money and life, have failed as yet to secure even the position of one city in Africa. The contrast in these results becomes the more surprising, when we take into view the vast disparity between the military resources of that nation and our own.

Among the inherent difficulties in the conduct of a war on our part, are the small number to which the policy of the country has limited the standing army, and the delay arising from the action of Congress in providing for an accession to our military resources. If the early recommendations of the War Department had been promptly attended to, vast advantages would have accrued to the service, which it is now less easy to secure.

Incidental difficulties have also occurred scarcely less formidable and embarrassing. The ill-timed correspondence of Gen. Scott, the temporary resignation of Gen. Worth, the precipitate action of Gen. Gaines, and the published letter of Gen. Taylor, might have well disturbed as serene a mind, and ruffled as unclouded a brow as that of the Secretary of War. All these matters have had their influence in distracting the public mind, and have furnished materials for assailing, at the caprice of the disaffected, the motives, intentions and position of a head of a department, who was eminently entitled, in his arduous position, to the entire support and sympathy of the country.

And now, that the correspondence between Gen. Taylor and the Secretary of War has been published, it is manifest to the most indifferent observer, that much, very much, has been left to the discretion of the American General; that his views have been sought in the most friendly manner by the

administration, and in the most friendly spirit received. No matter how competent, or how zealous or how efficient a War Department of itself may be, it is indispensable that confidence should be reposed in the Generals it sends to the field.

The military correspondence between Secretary Marcy and General Taylor does them both great honor, and will well compare with that collection which illustrates the Peninsular war. It affords a complete refutation of those audacious calumnies which have been charged upon our Government—the design of sacrificing our gallant army; and it shows, while the necessity of the conflict was forced upon us by the vindictive, unreasonable and bloody temper of the Mexicans, that it has been conducted on our part with chivalric courtesy—with a desire to escape the effusion of blood, and to terminate a struggle in which justice and equity were the tribunals to which we alone wished to appeal.

The Secretary of War knew his General, and the General appreciated the views of his superior. Between them there has been no real difficulty, and there justly can be none. It is for those who are ever ready to assail the Government—whose feeling is disaffection, and whose aliment is strife—to endeavor to create all the mischief in their power, to make the most bold and unfounded charges with unblushing front, or

“Spargere ambiguas voces,”

and assail by rumor what they find impregnable to violence.

From the commencement of the war the Secretary has been fully alive to the responsibilities of his station, his duty to his country, and the respect due to himself. In all his conduct he has shown himself far-seeing, prompt and sagacious. He has anticipated every probable difficulty and every possible failure. Our disturbed relations with Mexico belong to the times, and on our part have been unavoidable. We owe the bloodshed which has ensued to Mexican folly, and perhaps Mexican corruption. The War Department has thus far met every obstacle calmly and successfully; and whatever of praise we might choose to award its head for his former personal services in the field and in the cabinet, his later and more difficult career in a most trying and arduous position will but add to his acquired fame.

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